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Scandinavian Welfare Policies, Gender Equality and Globalization

by

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Introduction

The welfare states in Scandinavia¹ have been regarded as forerunners of gender equality, and this has been a central part of their political image. The countries are often celebrated for their woman-friendly potential, which relates mainly to two phenomena: Firstly, the political presence of women (parliamentary representation and the number of women in government), and the three countries have for many years been among the top five of the world (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world-arc.htm>). Also, the integration of women into the labour force in Scandinavia has been record high, and especially in Sweden and Denmark (OECD, various years). Secondly, they have adopted universal welfare policies that have expanded considerably public responsibility for reproductive tasks, such as care of small children and the elderly. This has strengthened women's economic autonomy and their independency of men and marriages. One outcome of this has been the relatively low poverty rates of single mothers in this region in comparison to countries such as Germany, Britain and the US.

In a book from 1987, the Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes launched the concept woman-friendliness as a characteristic of Scandinavian welfare states (Hernes, 1987). The concept became influential, both within Scandinavia and internationally. It marked a brake with the state pessimist stand that had been predominant in feminist scholarship hitherto. This mirrored a tendency in welfare state research to adopt a more international approach to Scandinavia, and Hernes' analysis reflected the comparative turn that the welfare state research tradition experienced at the time. The increasing interest in comparing Western welfare states and explaining variations among them implied a growing emphasis on the significance of agency and of political coalitions (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The scholarly attempts to cluster welfare states according to class and gender characteristics are abundant, but numerous scholars have criticized and nuanced the existence of models as general characteristics of welfare policies. They have pointed to variations within the models and to different patterns of different policies. Despite the criticism, it is noteworthy that when the Scandinavian countries are measured

¹ Includes Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The Nordic countries include these three countries plus Finland and Iceland.

against the strength of breadwinning, eligibility criteria or specific dimensions such as the ability to maintain autonomous households as single mothers, or the level of public care services, they have often been singled out as a distinct model.

A further development in welfare state research is the increasing acknowledgement of the role of institutions in shaping trajectories of the welfare states. A central issue is how initial political decisions form specific paths and subsequent path dependent developments of welfare policies. This perspective brings timing and sequence of events to the fore, and economic, political and discursive opportunity structures are often of central importance in explaining initial developments (Mahoney, 2000). Different timing and the various opportunity structures also contribute to understanding the distinct differences in gender equality policies in the three countries.

In this paper, I critically address the concept of woman friendliness, and I discuss its strengths and weaknesses and its normative and analytical value for understanding the Scandinavian societies. Subsequently, I focus at contrasting discourses about woman friendliness in debates about globalization and economic sustainability. Finally, I discuss the existence of gender paradoxes in Scandinavia, and I illustrate this by the case of Danish under implementation of gender mainstreaming.

Conceptualizing Gender Equality in Scandinavian welfare states

Hernes published her book in the wake of great optimism in Norway. It happened shortly after Gro Harlem Brundtland, the first female prime minister in Norden, had formed a government with 44 pct. female ministers. Furthermore, women occupied around 30 pct. of the seats in the Scandinavian parliaments. Hernes emphasized the broad political mobilization of women and their political presence as a central development, and she noted the 'considerable difference between being outside the forums of decisions-making and being part of them' (Hernes, 1987, 9).

It is, however, noteworthy that Hernes concluded that the Scandinavian welfare states had a woman-friendly *potential*: She defined woman friendliness in the following way:

A woman-friendly state would not force harder choices on women than on men, or permit unjust treatment on the basis of sex. In a woman-friendly state women will continue to have children, yet there will also be other roads to self-realization open to them. In such a state women will not have to choose futures that demand greater sacrifices from them than are expected of men. It would be, in short, a state where injustice on the basis of gender would be largely eliminated without an increase in other forms of inequality, such as among groups of women.

Helga Hernes (1987). *Welfare State and Woman Power. Essays in State Feminism*, Vojens: Norwegian University Press: 15.

The quote emphasizes the significance of women's options in relation to motherhood and care. In the book she analyzed changes in the private- public split in Scandinavia, and she claimed that 'reproduction had gone public'. This split has been a key element in feminist writing about women's restricted citizenship in patriarchal societies (Pateman, 1989).

Woman-friendliness was a catchy concept that gained enormous influence in public and scholarly debates, and Hernes' work provided fruitful insights in the political processes that fostered drastic changes in the lives of Scandinavian women. The strength of the concept was the focus on the interplay between forces 'from below' in terms of the broad political mobilization of women during the 1970s and 1980s and the response 'from above' in terms of the establishment of gender institutions and the adoption of policies. Yet, the concept suffered from several normative and analytically weaknesses that I will address in the following.

Normative Visions of Gender Equality

Hernes' concept was based on normative premises that were not made explicit (Borchorst & Siiim, 2008). The grand vision of gender equality in Scandinavia aimed at turning women into citizen workers like men by integrating women into the labour force and moving care work to the welfare state by expanding child care facilities. This vision promotes an ideal of sameness between women and men.

This is, however, only represents one of several normative visions for achieving gender equality. The American philosopher, Nancy Fraser distinguishes between three different visions based on normative principles related to poverty, exploitation, income distribution, leisure time, respect, marginalization and androcentrism (Fraser, 1997: 41-66). They differ particularly in the organization of care work. She terms the vision that has been predominant in Scandinavia, *the universal breadwinner model*.

A second vision, *the caregiver parity model* keeps care work in the family context and seeks to reevaluate informal care work through public benefits, such as care giver allowances. The visions aim at preserving the gendered division of care giving and breadwinning. It is based on gender difference, but seeks to make it costless for women. The purpose is to upgrade women as citizen carers.

Fraser concludes that neither vision adequately manages post-industrial dilemmas, and they are caught in an equality-difference dilemma that fails to solve some of the fundamental problems of women's inequality. She claims that a third vision has the potential to foster gender equality in this phase of capitalism, where women have been or are being integrated in breadwinning. *The universal caregiver model* aims at removing the gendered separation by making women's life patterns the norm of both women and men. It is based on shared parental roles of care and breadwinning. Her allegation is that this vision combines the best part of the two other visions and that it dismantles the gendered opposition between care and breadwinning.

The visions are analytical categories, that may coexist, but the underlying logics are to some extent contradictory, especially as far as the universal breadwinner and the caregiver parity vision are concerned. This has to do with the fact that the two visions are constructed around different perceptions of care of dependant persons.

Both Hernes and Fraser may be criticized for regarding care and breadwinning as the primary if not the sole element of their visions. This implies that policies of redistribution become the key factor in achieving gender equality. Scandinavian countries have adopted comprehensive universalist policies combined with a

modified progressive tax system, wherefore redistribution has been a distinctive element of Scandinavian welfare states. Policies of recognition have, on the other hand, occupied a comparatively less significant role in Scandinavia. The focus on redistributive policies in Hernes' work contributes to presenting Scandinavia as a model and a forerunner of gender equality. The focus on breadwinning and care by the two authors implies that other issues such as bodily integrity are neglected as an element in achieving gender equality.

Actor and Structures

Hernes' analysis highlighted the role of women's agency and the drastic changes in women's lives, whereas she downplayed structures and patterns of continuity in gender relations. It is noteworthy that another contribution to assessing the Scandinavian experiences, starkly contrasted Hernes' conclusions.

In a contribution to the Swedish power study, the historian Yvonne Hirdmann concluded that basically no major progress had occurred in the gender relations during the post-war period, and that the gender system had remained intact (Hirdman, 1990).

We see a new pattern of segregation and we see an old and a new hierarchy between men and women. In spite of active political decisions, in spite of powerful agents (of both sexes) who have worked for changing the subordinate position of women, the final conclusion will, however, be that the bottom line is that the situation of women has not improved fundamentally – compared to men's. The gender system has entered its "post modern" phase and the new positions and the new room of manoeuvre have been achieved at a high cost. When women have obtained the social positions, which was unknown to them they discover that they are powerless but filled with responsibility.

Yvonne Hirdman (1990). "Genussystemet", i *Demokrati och Makt i Sverige*. SOU: 1990: 44: 63. (my translation)

The key element in Hirdman's argument was that a gender system exists, and it is reproduced through two different logics, segregation and hierarchy based on a male norm.

Hirdmann's concepts greatly influenced the political debate, albeit mostly on the national level, where arguments about structural aspects of the discrimination of women served as motivation for political decisions in the 1990s, even by right wing governments. Her analysis aroused considerable public controversy, among other

things due to its pessimist undertone. This pessimism was rooted in the neglect of the role of women's and the political empowerment of women.

The differences between Hernes and Hirdman reflect the longstanding debate in social sciences about actors and structures as the most important social drivers. The debate has settled in the recognition of the two as mutually constituting factors. Furthermore, social scientists and feminist scholarship have increasingly acknowledged that besides actors and structures, institutions and discourses play a significant role in shaping social phenomena.

Woman Friendliness and Diversity

The concept of women friendliness has been criticized for being premised on the idea that women (and men) constitute a group with common interest and for glossing over differences between women (and men) in terms of class and ethnicity (Borchorst & Siim, 2008). This criticism may be directed to both Hernes' and Hirdman's work, which fail to take differences among women into account - theoretically as well as and empirically. Yet, it is noteworthy that Hernes in her definition of woman-friendliness quoted above, underlines that it is not compatible with increasing inequality among groups of women. Furthermore, the Scandinavian countries were characterized by relative ethnic homogeneity in the latter part of the 20th century. This has undoubtedly contributed to the lack of focus on diversity, and it characterized not only Hernes' and Hirdman's work but also feminist scholarship in general.

Since the late 1990s, diversity has gained importance at the same time as the countries have become more ethnically diversified. During this process gender equality in relation to minorities has been object of heated debate.

In the early 2000s, post colonial feminists mainly from Sweden asked, whether the grand vision of woman-friendly societies is based on the living conditions of white middle class women and excludes minority women (De los Reyes, Molina & Mulinari, 2003; Mulinari, 2008). Furthermore, there is a tension between the political vision of

gender equality and recognizing diversity (Siim, 2007). It is also questionable whether minority women have gained a voice in the same way as majority women did in the 1970s. In this way, it is debatable, whether the central elements in Hernes' definition of woman-friendliness applies to all groups of women.

Discourses about Globalization and Woman-Friendliness

In political as well as in scholarly debates, there has been increasing focus on, how the Scandinavian countries tackle the challenges that many welfare states face in terms of ageing of populations, multiculturalism and of globalization in a broader sense. These challenges are common to many countries, and many international organizations have provided recommendations on how to cope with them. Within the European Union, efforts have been devoted to designate a strategy to make EU the most competitive and knowledge based economy world most notably in the so called Lisbon strategy which was launched at a summit in Lisbon March 2000 (Lisbon European Council, 2000).

During the following debate, considerations for economic competitiveness were related to a discussion about equality. There were, however, competing discourses at play about gender equality and woman-friendly policies, which were framed both as solutions and as part of the problem.

One discourse was prompted by experts that were asked by the Belgian Presidency of the European Council to make the Lisbon strategy operational. The Belgians stated that the promotion of social equality should be a core element of the agenda. They argued with reference to John Rawls' normative theory that combating inequality was a central issue (Esping-Andersen, et al., 2002: foreword)

The experts concluded that the achievement of social equality and gender equality was central to compliance with the Lisbon objectives (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). A special chapter by Gøsta Esping-Andersen was devoted to a discussion about gender equality and woman-friendly policies. He concluded:

It is uncontroversial to promote better opportunities for women, not only because they respond to women's demands but also because their employment may yield

increasing social returns. In many countries women constitute a massive untapped labour reserve that can help narrow future age dependency rates and reduce associated financial pressures. Moreover as, women's educational attainment exceeds men's, clearly there exists an often large, untapped productive reservoir. We also know that female employment is one of the most effective means of combating social exclusion and poverty. All this implies that 'women-friendly' policy is, simultaneously, family- and society-friendly. If it yields a private return to individual women, it also yields substantial collective return to society at large. It should, accordingly, be defined as social investment.

Gösta Esping-Andersen et al. (2001). *Why we need a new welfare state*, Oxford: Oxford University press, p. 94.

Woman-friendly policies were defined as affordable childcare, parental leave and provisions for work absence when children are ill. These policies were labelled as win-win solutions that have the capacity to foster social inclusion, gender equality and improve economic competitiveness at the same time.

This win-win interpretation stands in stark contrast to another discourse framing welfare policies as the problem per se. It was voiced by the Danish Welfare Commission that was set up in 2003 by the present right wing government. It was given a task quite similar to the one that was assigned to the EU experts to analyse future challenges to the Danish welfare system.

The commission calculated net contributions (taxes) and net deductions (take up rates of services and benefits) of the Danish population in a life span, and it concluded that a Danish citizen on average is a net receiver of 800,000 DDK (Velfærdskommissionen, 2004: 381-83). The figures were broken down by gender and it was concluded that, over her lifetime, a newborn girl can expect to get 2.4 million DDK from the welfare state, whereas a newborn boy will contribute with 800,000 DDK. This was explained by the fact that women take up parental leave much more than men and they live longer, wherefore they need old age pensions more than men.

The commission was open to explanations linking the expansion of the Danish welfare state to the large-scale entry of women into the labour force, and it did not propose cutbacks in welfare service and childcare services. Still, the commission

framed women's pregnancy, births and responsibility for children as a cost to society and women as policy takers and money spenders. This argument triggered headlines in the newspapers like 'women cost big bucks', 'men pay the bill'.

It is interesting that the two groups of experts shared the same overall concern to improve economic competitiveness and to tackle the challenges of the ageing society, but they ended up with contrasting views about woman-friendly policies. This may be related to the fact that the EU experts were sociologists that were preoccupied with combating inequalities, whereas the Welfare Commission consisted mainly of neo-classical economists, which for the main and most important part of the analysis, it adopted a narrow utilitarian approach to welfare.

The Danish commission saw the Danish welfare architecture as a problem in itself, whereas the experts recommend Scandinavian solutions for the other EU countries. It is also noteworthy that none of them considered immigration as a means to solve the problem with ageing societies, and the preoccupation of the EU experts with inequality did not encompass differences between ethnic majority and minority groups.

Neither the EU experts nor the Danish Welfare Commission successfully influenced the policy agendas. The political configuration of the European Council has become more influenced by a neo liberal discourse that does not acknowledge social equality as a parameter for economic competitiveness. The Danish Welfare Commission provoked the right wing government with tax policy recommendations, and very few of their recommendations materialized.

Scandinavian Gender Paradoxes

The question remains, whether and to which extent, the woman-friendly potential of the Scandinavian countries has materialized. The countries have experienced some unmistakable gains in terms of gender equality. The three countries and especially Sweden and Denmark have been very successful in implementing a universal

breadwinner model, but it is also apparent that this vision does not have the potential to eliminate gender differences.

The increasing political presence of women is another major achievement. Yet, the Scandinavian and Nordic countries are not all in the top five in the world any more, because other countries have adopted a fast track strategy and have moved in front of some of them (Dahlerup, 2006; <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>). Also it is clear that minority women have not gained a voice to the same extent as majority women, and there are relatively few organizations of minority women.

Furthermore, in the light of Hernes' emphasis of women's option in relation to reproduction, it is noteworthy that women often lose control over future conditions of choice, when they become pregnant, give birth and care for small children. It is a paradox that the gender segregation of the labour market has been exacerbated in these countries. The Scandinavian countries also have relatively high gender pay gaps in a world wide comparison (World Economic Forum, 2008). Despite a strong discourse about gender equality as an automatic progressive development (Skjeie & Teigen, 2005) hierarchical gender patterns have proved remarkably resilient, and this accentuates Hirdman's conclusion about a gender system. (<http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2007.pdf>).

Yet, gender occupies a very different political role in the three countries. In Sweden, gender is ascribed a very important role within the political parties and the political system, whereas it occupies a very restricted role in Danish politics, and this generates specific gender paradoxes. This may be illustrated by the (non) implementation of gender Mainstreaming.

Gender Mainstreaming, Danish version

Mainstreaming has become the dominant gender equality strategy of the 2000s and its key logic is to ascribe gender central importance in policy making. It has been recommended by every international organization worth mentioning (UN, World Bank, ILO, OECD, EU, and Nordic Council of Ministers). Idea about women's

liberation often travel across borders, and international organizations have played a central role in the dissemination of ideas such as women's suffrage and the establishment of women's policy machinery (Finnemore & Siikkink, 1998). The processes of dissemination and the way the ideas emerge and become internalized and institutionalized do, however, vary greatly at the national level, and gender mainstreaming illustrates this point well.

The concept has been defined in many different ways that stretch from regarding it as a bureaucratic measure and method to highlighting its significance for generating reforms. Squires distinguishes between three types of strategies for gender equality that are not mutually exclusive and may coexist (Squires, 1999; 2005). Inclusion promotes sameness between the genders, and it aims at the integration of women in society. Reversal takes difference between the genders as the point of departure, and emphasized women's values. The two strategies tend to end up in the same kind of equality-difference dilemma that Fraser's visions of the universal breadwinner and the caregiver-parity visions generate, and Squires third strategy transformation, relates to a post modern or a post structuralist position that moves beyond equality and difference and highlights diversity. Squires concludes that mainstreaming may be conceptualized as all three different strategies, and it may be implemented both as a bureaucratic policy tool, as an agenda setting process, where women's organizations are consulted or as deliberation that is inclusive towards women and minorities (2005). Squires find that mainstreaming has a strong transformative potential.

The Danish case illustrates, however, that the national context and path dependant processes has reduced mainstreaming to symbolic objectives, and it is defined as a bureaucratic measure that is hardly implemented. The strategy was included in the Danish Gender Equality Act from 2000 and stipulated in the following way: 'Public authorities shall within their respective areas of responsibility seek to promote gender equality and incorporate gender equality in all planning and administration' (part 4). Yet, there are no attempts to implement the provision systematically, and there are no sanctions, if it does not happen. After the Danish EU Presidency in autumn 2003,

the government presented itself as a pioneer in mainstreaming. The minister of gender equality published a guide for future EU presidencies offering good advice to mainstreaming (Minister for Gender Equality, 2002). Still, very few political decisions in Denmark are subject to gender assessment, and gender mainstreaming has even turn out to be contra productive to gender equality measures. The strategy has for instance implied delegation of responsibility for gender equality to the different minsters that ascribes low priority to gender equality objectives.

A striking example of the non-implementation of mainstreaming is the recent Structural Reform, which represents the most comprehensive administrative reform in the history of the country. It implied that the 13 counties were replaced by 5 regions with a restricted number of tasks, and the number of municipalities was reduced from 271 to 98, that have become responsible for a number of tasks. The reform has implications for local policies, citizens, employees and political presentation.

However, the Commission was not asked to incorporate gender in its work as the Gender Equality Act stipulates, and the report of the commission totally ignored the issue. Neither were the numerous proposals for new legislation and amendments of existing laws subject to gender assessment except for a very few cases.

I will argue that the symbolic character of the mainstreaming effort is an outcome of path dependant processes. The formative years of Danish policies of gender equality were influenced by unfavourable economic, political and discursive opportunity structures (Borchorst, 2008). The momentum for gender equality that existed in the 1960s during the economic boom and was fostered by the broad political consensus about gender equality was during the early 1970s undermined by an economic crisis and open resistance to gender equality among two new political parties in Parliament. As a result, gender equality was defined as formal anti-discrimination and the machinery of gender equality that was established against a majority in Parliament was much weaker than the Swedish and the Norwegian (Bergqvist, et al. 1999).

Paradoxically, Denmark went further than any other Nordic country in terms of expanding public child care and care of the elderly, which constitute policies that are often defined as woman-friendly. These policies have undoubtedly facilitated the mass entry of women into the labour force, but they are not considered as an integral part of policies of gender equality. Besides, gender plays a modest role, when these policies are debated.

Finally, Danish mainstreaming is not related to diversity except for a few municipal projects. At the national level, ethnic majority women are often mentioned in debates about gender equality, but they are targeted as a problematic group that suffers from inequality due to cultural and individual reasons².

The central policy logic of mainstreaming is to make gender a central political category. Yet, Danish gender mainstreaming was introduced in a context where gender plays a very restricted political role, above all due to path dependant processes. Hence, efforts are far from realizing the transformative character of the strategy.

Conclusions and Perspectives

Helga Hernes conceptualization of the Scandinavian welfare states as woman-friendly has been influential in shaping scholarly and political discourses both within the region and internationally. It has been debated, whether woman-friendly policies may be exported as a normative ideal to other countries. The introduction of the concept marked a change towards a more state optimist approach among feminist scholars. The concept has, however, been normatively based towards Scandinavian

² This is illustrated by a quote by Prime Minister Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen's opening speech to the parliament, 2. October 2007

We will improve equality between women and men.
Equal opportunities between men and women contributes to creating strong cohesion.
Yet, not everybody in Denmark benefits from the gender equality. Some immigrant women do not have contact with the surrounding society. They do not know their rights, and they do not determine their own existence. The lacking gender equality for many immigrant women is part of the new inequality. The government will launch an overall effort to further gender equality between women and men with immigrant background

solutions, and the past decades has demonstrated that Scandinavian gender equality despite unmistakable gains also suffers from shortcomings.

The three welfare states have witnessed a mass entry of women to the labour market, but gender segregation has been exacerbated and pay gaps persist. This indicates that gender structures are remarkably resilient. Furthermore, the grand vision of gender equality has failed to take diversity and differences between women into account.

The analysis has also demonstrated that competing discourses about woman-friendliness and gender equality are at play in the debates about tackling challenges from globalization, multiculturalism and the ageing of populations. Both at the national and the European level there is an ongoing conflict about the political significance of gender.

The Danish case illustrates that despite far-reaching woman-friendly policies, the gender equality project and the gender mainstreaming effort remains curtailed and it does not solve the tensions between diversity and gender equality. Neither does it treat gender equality and diversity as an integral part of tackling the challenges from globalization, multiculturalism and the ageing population.

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